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MANTRAP

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*Cover Color Photograph
by Bill Hughes*

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WHAT DOES a man think about when he's falling? Is he still possessed with hate that has fingers of steel? Does he shriek against the death that waits for him after all of the lighted windows have flashed by? Is he a human being who will smash against the pavement or has he already become a terror-stricken animal screaming against the night air? . . .

The long car patiently threaded its way through the narrow dirty street and halted in the middle of the block in front of the Club Luna.

Simon Laskar uncrossed his legs and waited for the chauffeur to come around and open the door. His yellow-brown eyes went contemptuously over the shuffling, ragged men; the winos, stubble-whiskered and with begging eyes, who waited for him in the warm afternoon.

He stepped onto the windblown sidewalk and irritably blinked a mote of dust from his eyes. He was a man in his late thirties, trim and of medium height with dark brown hair and tense shoulders.

Laskar watched Harley close the door firmly and return to the driver's seat. His eyes speculated at Harley's back and he made a mental note to add him to the list. It could be anybody, he thought; anybody.

The derelicts made room for him

and he passed through them and went up the three stairs to the door. He turned and put his hand in his pocket. He rattled the half a dozen halves in his right hand like a pair of dice and tossed them to the sidewalk.

They scrambled for the bouncing, rolling half-dollars, grating worn cloth on the coarse concrete. Laskar's eyes followed the short struggle and then he moved inside the club.

He walked past the tables with the chairs stacked on them. He took the small elevator past the gaming rooms to the fourth floor.

When he opened the door to the paneled office, Otto Lund and Chris Taber got to their feet. Otto took his hat and Chris began fixing him a drink.

"How's the wife?" Otto asked.

Laskar sat down at the desk and accepted the drink Chris handed

death rail

BY JACK RITCHIE

What does a man think about as he falls through the night air . . . twenty-one stories above the pavement?

him. He looked at Otto. No, he thought, it couldn't be you. You're damn near sixty and that paunch is no beauty mark. You got no hair worth mentioning and your jowls flap when you talk.

"She's fine," Laskar said.

Chris Taber reached for the brief case on a chair and zippered it open. He glanced at the sheaf of accounts and laid them on Laskar's desk. Then he moved in easy strides to a chair and sat down.

Laskar followed his movements. But you're different, he thought. You're smooth as a seal and that mustache is just too damn tailored.

"You ever take ballet lessons?" Laskar asked.

Chris lifted an eyebrow and wondered how to take that.

Go ahead, get sore, Laskar's eyes said. He turned his attention to the papers. He spent fifteen minutes going over them and when he finished he looked up at Chris.

"It's going slow at the Highway Club," he said.

Chris shrugged his shoulders. "I told you it was an elephant when you bought it. It's too far out for one thing and the overhead is high. We got to take care of both the State Troopers and the county boys. My advice is to get rid of it and take the loss."

Laskar folded his hands. "No."

Otto's thick lips moved. "He's right, boss. I been out there a couple of times and it's pitiful."

"I don't take a loss on anything,"

Laskar said. "Make it pay."

"Those farmers go to bed at nine," Chris complained.

"You're getting paid to see that they don't," Laskar snapped. "Put off a few of your manicure appointments and use the time to think of something."

He stacked the papers and rapped them on the desk to even the edges. Chris came and took them out of his hand. He rifled the papers and reached for the drink on the desk. He put it down quickly when he saw the yellow in Laskar's eyes glowing. "Sorry, boss," he said. "I guess my drink is over there."

Laskar sat quietly for a few minutes after they left and then went to the window. He adjusted the Venetian blinds so that he could see down into the parking lot in the rear of the building.

Chris Taber slipped into his car, backed out of the space, and pulled into the street. A moment later a gray sedan eased from the curb and followed him.

Laskar went to the phone and dialed.

"I've got one more for you, McMaster," he said when he made his connection. "Ed Harley. He's my chauffeur."

McMaster repeated the name slowly as he wrote it down. "Got it. He live at your place?"

"No," Laskar said. He checked his pocket notebook and gave McMaster the address. "Got anything

for me?"

"Nothing," Chris paused. "I'm enjoying your money. Wasting it. You're my money receiver."

Laskar closed his eyes. He reached for the telephone. He stood and turned.

He moved, leaving tip of his rug. Celeste room idly

Her black hair she said. "I'm on your he

Laskar followed him. He came to along the corridor down to his head and a

Laskar got his hair in his hand. You're my belongings belong to me. He saw the her eyes and own her. Five years ago; he

But some

He twisted him; his hands played. Rounded belonged to me

DEATH RAIL

for me?"

"Nothing," McMaster said, and paused. "Look," he said finally. "I'm enjoying the business and it's your money, but I think you're wasting it."

"You're right," Laskar said. "It's my money." He cradled the receiver.

Laskar caught a taxi outside the club and took it to the Finley Hotel. He rode the elevator to the top floor. At the door of the penthouse he slipped the key into the lock and turned it carefully and quietly.

He moved into the apartment leaving tip-toe prints in the heavy rug. Celestine was in the living room idly playing solitaire.

Her black eyes met his. "Yes," she said. "I'm alone. You can walk on your heels now."

Laskar flushed. Celestine stood as he came to her. He ran his hands along the curve of her breasts and down to her waist. She tilted her head and allowed him to kiss her.

Laskar gripped the shining raven hair in his hands and looked at her. You're my wife, he thought. You belong to me completely and alone. He saw the secret independence in her eyes and he knew that he didn't own her. He'd bought her, over a year ago; but he didn't own her.

But someone did. *Who?*

He twisted her around hard, into him; his mouth found hers. His hands played over the firm, young, rounded body. The body that belonged to him.

She didn't fight him. She didn't respond. Laskar's left hand found the V of the \$200 dress, ripped it off her, the filmy underthings giving way with it. Her flesh was hot to his touch, but her eyes mocked up into his. Take me, they said, if you want to, but don't expect anything. He swore and let her go.

Celestine was as cool, as poised as if nothing had happened. She glanced at her wrist watch. "You said you'd be back at seven."

"There wasn't as much to do as I thought."

She smiled faintly as she stepped away from him, pulling the dress together covering the front of her.

Laskar reached for his cigarette case as he watched her. His fingertips left wet marks on the engraved silver.

She accepted a cigarette. Her eyes half-lidded as she drew in the smoke. "By the way, there's a man who's been following me," she said.

"It's your imagination."

"Of course. My imagination. But in that case I may be losing my mind. Don't you think I ought to see a psychiatrist?" The smile edged toward laughter.

"Don't talk nonsense," Laskar said.

"But it isn't nonsense, dear. You will get me an expensive one, won't you?"

Laskar went to the French windows and stared out at the terrace.

"What agency is it, dear?" she asked. "The best, I should suppose."

Laskar faced her. "All right," he said. "The best I could get."

"That's nice. You love me, but you don't trust me." She considered the contradiction and seemed amused by it.

"You're my wife," Laskar said tightly. "I've got a right to know if there's anything going on."

Celestine sat down at the cocktail table and picked up the deck of cards. "Why don't you invite your friends up more often, dear. Some of them are so interesting."

Laskar ground out his cigarette. "Get some things on and we'll go downstairs for dinner."

Celestine's hands moved over the layout. "No. I'm not hungry and besides this card game is just too damn interesting."

Laskar's eyes brooded down at her. He reached down and tipped the table so that the cards slithered to the floor.

Celestine leaned back indolently. "Unless you decide to pick them up, they're going to stay there a long time."

Laskar turned on his heel and walked toward the door.

In his office at the Luna Club he pulled a bottle of scotch from the liquor cabinet and opened it. When Otto brought in a check to be okayed at nine-thirty, a strand of Laskar's hair stuck damply to his forehead.

Laskar regarded the check dully before he reached for the desk pen. He put his initials on a corner of

the check and handed it back.

Otto lingered a moment. "Something wrong, boss?"

Laskar poured himself another drink. "Why the hell should anything be wrong? Mind your own damn business."

Dullness crept into Laskar's arms and legs as he drank, but the tautness in his neck was still there. When the phone buzzed he listened to it for half a minute before he reached for the receiver.

"Laskar," he mumbled.

"McMaster. I think we got something."

The slouch in Laskar's back slowly dissolved.

"He's up in your apartment now," McMaster said. "Might not be anything to it, but if this is what you were waiting for, it's as good as the real thing as far as evidence is concerned."

Laskar's numb lips moved. "Who?"

"This Chris Taber guy. We tailed him here and he took the elevator to the twenty-first floor. Since you lease the whole thing, it was no strain to figure where he was going."

Anger began driving the haze from Laskar's brain. His hand went to the back of his neck and began rubbing.

"You coming over or do you want us to handle it alone? We can wait until he comes out and have the house dick there for another witness. Or we could break in. But

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MANTRAP

we'll need you there for that or it could mean our licenses."

"I'll be over," Laskar said.

Outside the club Laskar flagged at the passing taxis. A wino whose dirty-white sleeve lining showed at the shoulder-seams regarded him with a smile of liquor contentment.

Laskar reached automatically for a quarter and tossed it on the sidewalk. The derelict's moist blue eyes went down to the coin. He spit at it expertly. "Not tonight, Mr. Laskar. Tonight I don't bend down."

Laskar sat in the taxi, his stomach tight with irritation at every stop light. He leaned forward in urgency the last half mile and had a dollar bill ready when the taxi braked to a stop.

He hesitated in front of the hotel and his eyes traveled up the waffle indentations of the windows to the top of the hotel. He cursed softly and moved for the glass doors.

McMaster fell into step with him as Laskar strode for the elevators. He was a big man whose beef had acquired an overlay of suet.

He puffed keeping up with Laskar. "I think we ought to wait a little longer. At least until after midnight. That way we got it sewed up. It always looks bad if they stay after midnight, even if nothing happens."

Laskar stepped into the elevator and McMaster followed him. A thin man weighed with a swinging camera joined them before the

doors closed.

"This is Harry," McMaster said. "But with giving them only a half hour up there, I don't think we'll get much in the way of pictures. Unless he's a fast worker."

McMaster rocked on his heels as the elevator rose. "All right, then, if you don't want to wait, this is the way we'll do it. You unlock the door yourself quiet-like and we rush in fast before they got time to think about it. If there's anything worth taking, Harry will be ready."

The elevator came to a silent stop and Laskar got out. He turned and faced the two. "Go back down," he said. "I'll handle this myself."

McMaster and Harry glanced at each other with sudden uncomfortable understanding.

"I'll take care of this in my own way," Laskar said.

"Now look," McMaster said hurriedly. "You're not thinking of doing anything you'll be sorry for?"

"I'm not going to be sorry."

McMaster's voice was a surprised complaint. "I thought this was just routine divorce stuff."

A nerve in Laskar's cheek twitched uncontrollably. "I don't give a damn what you thought. Just take your boy and get out of here."

They felt obligated to linger and reason with Laskar, but looking at him they knew it was no use. They came to a wordless agreement to wash their hands of this case and left with the hope that the agency wouldn't get involved if something

nasty happened.

Laskar waited for their elevator to begin its descent and then turned to the door and inserted the key. He swung open the door to an empty room. He went swiftly and silently through the apartment, but the other rooms were empty too. He finally saw them outside in the gloom of the terrace.

Chris Taber leaned on the chest-high guard rail and smoked a cigarette as he watched the city lights. Celestine's laughter came to Laskar's ears as he stood at the open French windows and watched.

Chris flipped his cigarette over the rail and watched its firefly arc. Celestine, her eyes glittering in the moonlight and her lips faintly parted came close to Chris. She put her arms around him and, her white shoulders trembling as she pressed closer, met his lips. Chris put her gently away, surprised. Surprised, Laskar's mind raged, now that they knew a tail was on them.

Laskar's fingers tensed for action as he shoved aside the French door and stepped out.

Chris and Celestine parted abruptly as they heard him. Their faces were pale in the moonrays as they faced him. Celestine stepped to one side as Laskar came forward, his lips tight over sharp teeth.

The back of Chris' hand went to the dark stain on his lips but he saw it was useless to try to rub away the lipstick. His eyes darted to Celestine and back to Laskar.

"Wait a minute, boss," he said.
"This isn't what you think."

Laskar moved with cat speed as his fingers darted for Chris' throat. They crashed together, writhing as Laskar strained to kill with a madman's hate and Chris raked defensive fingernails on his wrists.

They twisted and staggered, their bodies a tight jerking shadow. Chris gasped rawly for air as he was pressed against the guard rail. Laskar's hands forced his head backwards until his feet were off the terrace and he kicked frantically.

As Chris slipped over backwards, his fingers clung to Laskar in a vise grip that took Laskar along with him . . .

What do men think about when they are falling?

Does this new thing, this new way of dying, this inexorable plunge make them forget everything except that they do not want to die? Do their eyes widen in horror as they fall? Do their hands stretch desperately to keep away the sidewalk that rushes toward them like a monster?

And what does a woman think of as she stands with her hands firm on the guard rail?

What does she think about as she looks down twenty-one stories to the street?

And smiles to herself, knowing she has it all now. Everything that was her husband's. Including his chauffeur.

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